3. Are PR electoral systems more democratic than first-past-the-post systems?

Elections are the centrepiece of the democratic process in countries across the world. With direct democracy being practically inefficient in governing large groups of people, particularly on a state-wide level, elections are needed to choose representatives who will legislate and govern on behalf of the people. This essay will compare the two most prominent competing types of electoral system: proportional representation and first-past-the-post, and show how proportional representation is more democratic by involving more of the electorate and producing governments that work for a broader interest.

With their very nature, proportionally representative electoral systems are more democratic than first-past-the-post systems. Under first-past-the-post systems: in a given constituency the candidate with the plurality of votes will win the election – even if it is far below a majority. This is a significant problem with first-past-the-post systems, as votes in an election for any other than the winning candidate are ‘wasted’, with only the explicit opinions of those voting for the winner being taken into account. The different opinions of a majority of people could be discounted in favour of a united plurality. In the last three UK General Elections in 1997, 2005 and 2010, more constituencies were won by less than 50% of the vote than were won by over 50%. (Electoral Reform Society, 2010, p. 28). Furthermore, 52.8% of votes “were cast for losing candidates and therefore did not contribute to electing MPs” which increases to 71.1% when “Taking votes that ended up being surplus to winners’ requirements” in to account. (Electoral Reform Society, 2010, p. 35) This shows that first-past-the-post does not mean that the representative that is elected effectively commands the support of their constituents – which is not beneficial for democracy.

This also causes a problem of some parties receiving significant levels of support but not being represented in a legislature. A party that receives the second highest number of votes in many first-past-the-post constituencies is not guaranteed any representation. The Electoral Reform Society describes the “phenomena of the ‘electoral desert’” whereby in a first-past-the-post election a party receives a large level of support in a “locality” of multiple constituencies but does not receive any representation. (2010, p. 23) Examples from the 2010 UK General Election include Surrey, where the Liberal Democrats received 28.5% of votes but no MPs were
returned; South-East Greater Manchester where the Conservatives received 28% of votes but received no MPs and in Central Scotland where the Scottish National Party received 22.2% of the vote but returned no MPs. (Electoral Reform Society, 2010, pp. 23-25).

Proportional representation seeks to create a legislature where the number of seats earned by a party in an election correlates more closely with the number of votes received in that election. Had proportional representation been in place in the previous example, the Liberal Democrats would have received 3 seats in Surrey, the Conservatives would have received 3 seats in South-East Greater Manchester and the Scottish National Party would have received 2 in Central Scotland. (Electoral Reform Society, 2010, pp. 23-25) With proportional representation, political parties would have a level of representation much closer to their level of support in the electorate – which is the ideal of direct representation.

The democratic problem of ‘wasted’ votes that comes with the first-past-the-post system is nullified by proportional representation which provides an elected body that includes more representation from minority parties that are less likely to win constituencies under the first-past-the-post system. According to Karp & Banducci: “Voting is assumed to be more ‘satisfying’…because fewer votes are wasted”. (2008, p. 330) With proportional systems, such as the Single Transferable Vote (STV), voters can rank candidates in order of preference and can help influence the election of candidates other than their most favoured. If a voter’s first choice candidate is either elected or eliminated, their second choice candidate will receive their support in gaining any further seats. This fulfils Dahl’s 4th criteria needed for effective voting, in a sense:

“Any member who perceives a set of alternatives, at least one of which he regards as preferable to any of the alternatives presently scheduled, can insert his preferred alternative(s) among those scheduled for voting.” (Dahl, 1956, p. 70)

This is far more democratic because the opinions of more people are being considered in the election of representatives and this will produce a government or elected body that better reflects what Rousseau called “the general will of the
people” which will provide what is best “in the interests of the community as a whole”. (Wraight, 2008, p. 40)

Proportional representation means that there is a larger emphasis on consensus in governing and creating legislation, which is a good thing for democracy. Elections that use proportional representation tend to produce legislatures with smaller majorities/pluralities for the largest party as well as including more parties in general. This means that the government is more likely to be created from a coalition of different parties, which fosters co-operation and the inclusion of the views of more people. Having more parties in the legislature and in government means that there is a wider range of opinion represented, and the minority parties are often involved in tipping the balance of certain votes on legislation. It also solves the problem of the “tyranny of the majority”, a theory developed by John Adams and picked up on by Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, where the majority ignores the will of the minorities or, at worst, the “that party, not always the majority, that succeeds, by force or fraud, in carrying elections” – a situation that can occur with the first-past-the-post electoral system. (Maletz, 2002, pp. 758-759) Such majoritarian systems are normatively inferior to consensual democracy because even though the majority may be in favour of a policy, it does not necessarily mean that it is good for the whole society.

In contrast with proportional representation, first-past-the-post systems tend to create a less competitive two-party political system, through a phenomenon known as Duverger’s Law. Maurice Duverger’s research into first-past-the-post led him to conclude that: “the simple-majority single ballot system favors the two-party system”. (Duverger cited in Riker, 1982, p754) Examples of such a system include in the United States of America where the Democratic and Republican parties have controlled the executive and legislative branches of government for over 150 years and in the United Kingdom where the Conservative and Labour parties traded governance for almost 90 years before the 2010 General Election produced a coalition government. This leads to a lack of political freedom for voters, whose electoral choice is reduced to a contest between which of the two parties they prefer most – even if they do not necessarily believe fully in the party’s beliefs or manifesto. A 2013 ComRes poll of UK voters showed that 60% agree that “all the major political
parties seem to offer pretty much the same policies” and that “47% to 42% voters complain of feeling that their vote “doesn't really count””. (ComRes, 2013) This apathy, brought about because of the first-past-the-post system, is not good for democracy and hurts the practice as a whole.

Coalition governments have been successful worldwide in building prosperous states. Fourteen out of the twenty G20 powers (including the European Union) use proportional representation in their national legislative elections. India, Brazil and Germany, the most populous democracies in their respective continents, all have coalition governments formed by proportional representation and have succeeded both socially and economically. The support for these governments produced by proportional representation can be proven in that “most countries did not change their electoral formulas during the period 1945-2010” and in recent times “the more important changes that did occur all took place in the 1990s – in New Zealand, Italy and Japan – and two of these three switched to MMP” (Mixed Member Proportional representation). (Lijphart, 2012, p. 137) There has been support in some countries where first-past-the-post is used for a change to proportional representation. In the United Kingdom in 2011 there was a referendum on the introduction of the Alternative Vote (AV) electoral system in place of first-past-the-post; which, although unsuccessful, showed that 32% of the population was in favour of the change. Proportional representation is an electoral system that is favoured worldwide as a democratic method.

Proportional representation is also supported in countries where its’ use is limited. In research conducted after the 1999 and 2003 Scottish Parliament elections, 66% and 59% (respectively) of those asked strongly agreed “that the Scottish Parliament should be elected using proportional representation?” compared to 9% and 11% (respectively) who were strongly against. 50% of those asked in 1999, and in 33% of those asked in 2003 strongly agreed that “the voting system used in Scottish Parliament elections should be used in future to elect MPs to the House of Commons” with only 15% and 17% (respectively) disagreeing. (Curtice, 2004) On the whole this evidence shows the people of Scotland are satisfied with the outcomes of their elections and that they believe in proportional representation.
Perhaps because the electorate believe their vote to be more important, turnout for elections using proportional representation has been observed to be higher than in systems where plurality or majority rule systems are employed. Research of 509 elections in 20 different countries by Blais & Carty showed that “turnout tends to be higher under PR than under either plurality or majority rule elections” by an “order of ten percentage points”. (1990, p. 174) With the normative belief that more people being involved in the democratic process makes it more legitimate, proportional representation would appear to be more democratic than first-past-the-post on this evidence.

There are criticisms of proportional representation that are valid. With its inherent tendency towards coalition government, proportional representation does not provide strong governments in the way that first-past-the-post does. Between 1988 and 2009, an average of 46 Public General Acts of Parliament were enacted per year in the UK under the rule of majority Governments. However in the three full years of the current coalition government (2011, 2012 and 2013) an average of only 27 Public General Acts of Parliament were enacted. (National Archives, 2014) This shows that the coalition government has not been able to enact as much legislation as a majority government could.

With a less efficient process of governing – less is being achieved because of the longer time spent on compromising and deal-making. There is more dissatisfaction amongst the electorate about how they are being governed. The Guardian reported that an Institute for Government Poll in May 2011 showed that “68% of people think coalition has created weaker government, 73% believe it is less decisive and 80% say it is ‘more confused’”. (Curtis, 2011)

However, proponents of proportional representation will argue that the compromising needed from a coalition government produces stronger legislation overall by ensuring it appeals to more of the electorate overall and will produce better effects than a hastily considered Act. Although it produces “less effective government” it is “fairer and more effective in representing political views”. (Galeotti, 1994, p. 359) It can also be noted that because there are less drastic swings between parties between elections than in first-past-the-post systems as “those elections which produce extremely proportional results… are characterised by the lowest level of
volatility” (Bartolini & Mair cited in Galeotti, 1994). The overall nature of government in a state from election to election is more stable and consistent – which is beneficial for both the citizens of the state and democracy.

A further argument against proportional representation is that its’ dampening effect on inter-election change of power reduces the effect of parties’ and representatives’ negative actions with “less electoral risk” to them. As such “the discretionality which politicians enjoy in their sphere of action can become so wide as to reduce the relevance of voters…bringing about an oligarchic inversion of the logic of representation”. (Galeotti, 1994, p. 365) Without needing the same level of support to be re-elected representatives can lose their need to take decisions that represent the views of their constituency – which is obviously to the detriment of democracy.

Another criticism of proportional representation is that it weakens the link between a representative and his/her constituents. This is a particularly common criticism of the Additional Member System (AMS) that is used for elections to the Scottish Parliament – whereby each citizen has one representative elected from their constituency and a further seven representatives elected from their region’s list vote. This leads to a confusion amongst citizens as to who to contact to raise a concern and makes representatives less personally accountable to their constituents, as their actions can be attributed equally to the other representatives of that area.

These criticisms can be countered by the fact that having more representatives means that there are more avenues for a citizen to make their feelings known to those in power and each citizen is more likely to have their issue taken forward because there is more variety of political opinion in a legislature elected by proportional representation. Under first-past-the-post, citizens who voted for anyone other than the winning candidate in their constituency have little choice but to raise any concerns they have with that representative. With proportional representation, they are more likely to be able to contact a representative that they have either voted for or believe will better relay their concern to the legislative. This barrier to access is particularly important in constituencies with fragmented electorates, such as different minorities, who may be less likely to be politically involved if there is no representative from their social or ethnic group. A study of minority representation in the United States of America by Gerber, Morton and Rietz showed that: “attaining
the goal of increased minority representation” in a country where first-past-the-post is most commonly used “seems impossible, short of proportional representation”. (Gerber, et al., 1998, p. 129) Citizens contacting their representatives and feeling that their concern is being dealt with effectively is key to democracy and is handled better through proportional representation than first-past-the-post.

While having a lower risk at the ballot box than under first-past-the-post, representatives may actually take less politically motivated decisions in voting for legislation than they would if they believed it would hurt their re-election chances. This is to the benefit of the state and democracy, as representatives should vote for what they believe is the good of their constituents.

It can be argued that with a coalition government and proportional representation, it can be hard for voters to remove all of the ruling parties from power at elections. This can be an issue, as Áron Kiss argues that “coalition parties cannot be given appropriate team incentives” and so “to incentivize government performance, voters have to make one of the coalition parties responsible for the outcome. This creates incentives for the other party to reduce government performance.” (Kiss, 2009, p. 414) Therefore coalition governments cannot work for the best outcome of the people but rather out of their own self-interests. This means that coalition government is not only less effective because of the time spent on finding agreement but also because of the time spent on disagreement, which is certainly not to the benefit of democracy. This is one key area where proportional representation must concede to being less democratic than first-past-the-post but there are many more examples where the opposite is true.

On the whole, proportional representation is an electoral system that produces fairer, more representative and therefore more democratic governments than first-past-the-post. Proportionally representative voting systems include the opinions of more voters, resulting in fewer ‘wasted’ votes whilst placing a larger emphasis on governments finding a consensus when making legislation and creating a democracy that people are more interested in participating in. Although there are some faults with the effectiveness of governments elected under proportional representation, proportional representation is a normatively better way of electing public officials and is therefore more democratic than first-past-the-post.
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Bibliography


